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What Is the Role of Public Relations?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System
in cooperation with the Public Relations Society of America

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What Is the Role of Public Relations?

MR. McBURNEY: Our speakers today are Milton Fairman, Director of Public Relations of The Borden Company, in New York, and Past President of the Public Relations Society of America; Ed Lipscomb, Director of Public Relations of the National Cotton Council of America, and President of the Public Relations Society of America; Conger Reynolds, Director of Public Relations of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana; and Reynolds Seitz, Director of the Chicago Division of the Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University.

Now, Reynolds, to begin with—discussing, as we are, the role of public relations—tell us what you mean by public relations. What relations are encompassed? With what publics are you concerned?

Various Publics

MR. REYNOLDS: I think the meaning is suggested by the words themselves. We mean the relations of any organization or institution, or even a person, with some larger segment of society which we designate as a "public." We public relations people like to speak in the plural when we are talking about "public." We like to talk about "publics." We like to think of various specific publics or segments of society.

In corporate business, for instance, a business organization likes to divide the public up into such segments as employees, stockholders, suppliers, dealers, and then, getting to broader publics, their customers. Or maybe they think of some specialized public such as the thought leaders, people who are specially interested in public affairs, or perhaps a farm group. Those we call specialized publics.

MR. McBURNEY: What are your purposes and objectives in public relations? What are you trying to accomplish with these publics that Reynolds just described, Fairman?

MR. FAIRMAN: I think we are try-

ing in a democratic society to get an understanding of each of the institutions so that it fits into the over-all scheme, and is accepted by the people on the basis of understanding and what it does for the common good.

MR. SEITZ: I would like to say here that if we go back to our original definition of a democracy as a system, in which people retain their right to make ultimate and free choices, then we must come to the inevitable conclusion that people can't make proper choices unless they have the facts, and it seems to me that it is the responsibility of the public relations profession to give the facts to the people, to the publics.

All Available Media

MR. McBURNEY: In attempting to do that job, I assume, Lipscomb, you resort to all methods and all available media?

MR. LIPSCOMB: Well, all available media. I wouldn't say all methods. We definitely . . .

MR. McBURNEY: That's a nice limitation. [Laughter]

MR. LIPSCOMB: Yes, sir. We definitely want to employ any medium through which it is possible to transmit information and knowledge to whatever public may be involved, and, of course, the great mass media are most familiar to us—newspapers, radio, motion pictures—but we also find very important some media that normally are not thought of as ones we use, such as the man-to-man, face-to-face contact, the man on the platform, even such programs as this one we are on today.

MR. McBURNEY: What is the origin of this whole notion of public relations that we are talking about here, Reynolds? Is it essentially (I assume it is) a development of mass production?

MR. REYNOLDS: Well, yes, but I think people have always had public

relations problems. In the simpler society, the cobbler, for instance, knew all his customers, knew all his employees, and he could deal with them face to face, but in our complicated modern society, our organizations and units of all kinds have grown so large that it is quite impossible to have the same direct personal relationships.

We have tended to specialize in many ways, and so we are building up a specialty in dealing with relations between the institution and people.

MR. SEITZ: Along this same line, we might point out that one of the real tragedies of the time is that our age has brought men closer in time and space, but the complexities of modern society brought with them (as Reynolds just said, by the development of mass production) the Industrial Revolution, and have really built barriers between men's minds.

Which brings me back to what I said just a little while ago, that the really fundamental responsibility of the public relations profession is to give people the facts, and to break down the barriers which separate man from man.

Competition for Interest

MR. FAIRMAN: And, of course, there is more than a growth in barriers, too. There is the competition for interest, because within the last twenty-five years we have seen the complete history of radio, of television, of the picture magazine, of the big mass circulation media. We have this constant competition of ideas, all of them trying to crowd in and to find a place in one mind. I think that has created some of the confusion in the democracy, a confusion that it is our job to clear up.

MR. MCBURNEY: You say there is this competition among ideas for people's minds. Do you regard public relations as essentially a propaganda approach?

MR. FAIRMAN: No, I don't think it is a propaganda approach, because propaganda, which is a European term (and, incidentally, can be straight communication in Europe),

in this country has a connotation that is an evil one. It seems to suggest that the information is false and the information is probably biased. In public relations you don't attempt to do that. You attempt to present the facts, to present the facts with clarity, so that you will get an understanding (I go back to the understanding that is essential in a democratic society) of all the factors and how they are related to the individual and the group or institution.

MR. MCBURNEY: Well, is this—the process of achieving understanding between, let's say, corporations and the publics in which they are primarily interested—a one-way street, or a two-way street, Lipscomb? It would have to be a two-way street, I take it.

MR. LIPSCOMB: Yes, it would have to be a two-way street. It is even more than that. In creating understanding, very logically, the outgrowth of that is to try to create conditions which, when understood, will result in favorable attitudes toward the organization or the company with which you may be working, so not only do you want to know what the public is thinking of you, but you want them to know the truth about you, and you want that truth to be such that, when known, it is in your favor.

Promote Economic Education

MR. SEITZ: Going back to this matter of propaganda, I think we ought to point out that public relations needs to promote economic education, needs to inform people about our social and economic system, which, incidentally, has provided the highest standard of living known so far in the world.

Unfortunately, too many people accept the benefits of this society without being conscious of the way the society functions, and I think that in the past, business has too often talked about production figures instead of explaining to the people what made production possible.

MR. REYNOLDS: I believe that business is very conscious of that responsibility, and is today looking upon

economic education as one of its first public relations responsibilities.

MR. LIPSCOMB: I would like to point out further that Mr. Seitz will have no difficulty in obtaining the full cooperation of public relations people in that objective. They realize that the practice of public relations as it exists in this country today would be impossible except in the sort of an economy we have. As regimentation increases, there is less opportunity for this sort of thing, and when dictatorship takes hold, public relations is no longer possible, and in place of that you have propaganda from a central source that is set toward the objective of maintaining the dictatorship.

MR. FAIRMAN: Of course, one of the big problems we have is whether or not the public really wants to understand economic education. We don't know how deep an interest there is, and that is one of the great dangers this country has—that the people, being unable to understand what keeps the country a going concern, are not going to listen to facts. I'm not sure how much interest there is.

Simplicity of Approach

MR. SEITZ: It seems to me that our responsibility there is to present the facts in such an interesting way, such a simple way, that the public will be interested.

We all know that we have to appeal to a mass mind by using all that we know about psychology, all that we know about journalism, from the standpoint of simplicity of approach. I think that is the answer to what you say there, Mr. Fairman.

MR. McBURNEY: In one context Seitz suggested—and I think you concurred, Fairman—that a primary responsibility of public relations is to provide information, to provide facts. Lipscomb, in another context, used these words, that we ought to try to "create conditions." Do you limit yourself to facts and information, Fairman, or do you try to create conditions favorable to these publics with whom you deal? There is a distinction there, isn't there?

MR. FAIRMAN: There is a definite distinction. Of course, the first step

is that every institution, to survive in a democratic society (I keep getting back to that society) has to prove that it not only serves its own purpose but also helps to meet the ends of society.

You take a corporation, which is set up primarily to make a profit. People put their money together, pool it, get a corporation going, and, in earning their profit, they get consumer goods.

In our case, for instance, they provide markets for farmers. They give jobs to people. They pay dividends to stockholders, and in these days they pay a considerable amount of tax to the government.

MR. McBURNEY: Are you concerned about creating conditions—to use that phrase again—favorable to one of your publics, the farmers?

'Help Clients'

MR. FAIRMAN: That's correct.

For instance, this gets back to the philosophy of why you are doing things. We deal with about 60,000 farmers all over the United States. We serve as their market. We know that unless those farmers can make a good living out of farming, there is going to be dissatisfaction, so as the basis for our farm program we try to do two things: First of all, we try to demonstrate, to show farmers what is the most efficient way of carrying on dairying so that the farmer will make a better net profit. Then, secondly, we try to explain (and this goes back to Seitz' point) the economics that are involved in production, in supply and demand, in price, so that the farmer can understand this very complicated system of milk economics.

MR. REYNOLDS: May I reduce it to a very simple formula, an "A plus B" formula? In order to achieve good public relations, we think we have to (a) live right—that is, show due concern for the public interest, and (b) we have to communicate, and I mean communicate in two ways. We have to know what the public expects of us, in order to be accepted, and we have to communicate facts so as to achieve understanding.

MR. LIPSCOMB: May I take another

shot at a simple formula, by saying that public relations normally is thought of as setting your light on a hill rather than under a bushel, and that in addition to setting it on the hill, we have to light the light, and that is what we mean when we say we create the conditions that will make us accepted when the public does know the facts.

'Responsibility of All'

MR. MCBURNEY: Well, when you men, as public relations officers, set the light on the hill and light the light, do your companies pay any attention to that light when they work out their policies?

MR. REYNOLDS: Wait a minute. I don't think that we men, who are public relations men, have the sole job of lighting the light. That is something that has to be done by everybody in the organization. Everyone has to have some public relations sense in order to get that light properly lit. I just wanted to make that one point.

MR. MCBURNEY: And who pays any attention to it after it's lit?

MR. FAIRMAN: I think any smart operator of any institution pays attention to it, as a matter of survival, if nothing else. If he doesn't pay attention to it, he doesn't hold his customers, he doesn't keep his students in the case of a university. He has to pay attention to it as a matter of sound operating procedure.

MR. MCBURNEY: Incidentally, you referred to a university in this discussion of public relations. I think it might be proper to observe here—see if I'm right—that public relations, as we discuss it, is by no means confined to business and industry. Is that correct?

MR. REYNOLDS: Oh, it's not at all confined to business and industry.

MR. MCBURNEY: Would government, for example, come into it?

MR. REYNOLDS: Government has a public relations problem. All kinds of service institutions, such as hospitals, universities, educational institutions of all kinds have such problems.

MR. LIPSCOMB: The government's

public relations problem might be indicated by the recent statement of a Congressman that they had some 23,000 people who now are employed in this type of activity in one form or another.

Also, certainly, farmers (on the other side of Fairman's company) have their public relations problems, too, and even churches, particularly in our area, have been having some big ones lately.

MR. MCBURNEY: Speak more specifically, Lipscomb, if you would, to this question I had before the group a minute ago: To what extent does public relations enter into policy determination?

MR. LIPSCOMB: Well, perhaps the best way of getting at that one is to illustrate what happens in my own case, as the public relations officer for my organization, the National Cotton Council, operating across the 18 southern states.

Policy Determination

I am required to sit in the meetings of the Board of Directors, to keep a public relations eye on any action in the adoption of resolutions, to make sure that in the consideration of those things, the Directors themselves do not become forgetful for one moment of some implication in the public relations field that I might catch, which might otherwise get by.

MR. SEITZ: Also, I think that same thing is generally true in the area of advertising. The public relations man sits in on the advertising council for his particular company, especially as regards institutional advertising.

MR. MCBURNEY: Are you concerned as well with personnel and employee relations?

MR. REYNOLDS: In a large corporation, of course, we specialize a great deal, and in my organization we have an entirely separate employee relations department, but we have the closest cooperation with that department. It is obvious that in all kinds of human relations there must be close liaison, and we have that, of course, with the personnel and employee relations people.

MR. MCBURNEY: It is perfectly ob-

vious from what you men have been saying that this whole job which needs to be done is premised on the assumption that you know what these publics think, or you can find out what these publics think, what their attitudes are. How do you go about that, Seitz?

MR. SEITZ: The best way of going about it, the most scientific way of going about it, of course, is to use the poll or public opinion survey, which today is a pretty scientific thing and a pretty accurate thing.

MR. McBURNEY: You really have confidence in those polls?

MR. SEITZ: To a large extent, at least to the extent where you have a high percentage built up, of course. The poll must be carefully drawn up. I stress that it must be a valid sampling, and it must follow the techniques that have been worked out by the researchers. If the poll is valid and accurate, then I feel that if the percentage builds up, you are pretty sure that you have an indication which points toward the correct answer.

MR. McBURNEY: It is better than wetting your finger and holding it up in the air to see which way the wind is blowing.

Importance of Polls

MR. SEITZ: It's far better, and it's also better from the standpoint of convincing the non-believers, those who doubt the public relations profession. If you can show them a survey, a poll, you will convince them much more readily than simply pretending to draw upon your own experience.

MR. McBURNEY: What if you get a good, stiff letter from one of your farmers, Mr. Fairman? Do you pay any attention to that?

MR. FAIRMAN: I think every institution today reads its mail pretty carefully, Dean. Sometimes the mail covers situations that merely have to be explained; in other cases it can cover a situation that has to be remedied.

I think the letter to the president of a corporation today gets pretty prompt attention.

You can't always change a situa-

tion because of one letter, but you can bring it again for consideration, and take action if it is possible and necessary.

MR. McBURNEY: Do you think the attitudes of your employees and the plant community in which you live, Reynolds, are a pretty good index of public attitudes generally?

MR. REYNOLDS: Well, yes. Of course, good public relations begin at home. It begins with employees. That has long been the feeling of public relations people, and we wouldn't hope to get good public relations results unless we could convince our own employees that our policies and practices are acceptable.

MR. McBURNEY: Can you serve all these masters at once? You talk about these different publics—your employees, your buyers, the people from whom you buy. Aren't their interests often diverse and competitive?

'Serve Many Masters'

MR. FAIRMAN: Dean, that is one of the worst problems I think any institution has. In our case we have a perfect example, where the company stands as a sort of a juggler who has to toss in the air and keep in the air a number of balls representing various interests, all at once. The farmers, obviously, always want to have more money for milk. The consumer always wants to pay less money for milk.

MR. McBURNEY: That's precisely my point.

MR. FAIRMAN: And the employees always to earn more money.

MR. McBURNEY: And your stockholders want to get more money.

MR. FAIRMAN: And the stockholders want to get more money, so in the case of the corporation you have a balancing agent trying to satisfy the needs of all these groups. Obviously, you can't serve all of them perfectly, but what you can do—and what we try to do—is explain to the consumer what the farmer wants and why, and what the employee wants and why, and you can try to explain to the employee what the consumer wants and why.

MR. SEITZ: That's just the point, I

think. As we have said many times here, the matter of explanation is the important thing. If the people grasp your point, then you have gone a long way.

MR. FAIRMAN: Well, we have gone quite a long way. I think the war brought people to an understanding of economic facts that they never had before, because the front pages of the daily newspapers talked of supply and demand and shortages and the many economic factors involved.

For instance, it's pretty hard for us to explain to people why milk prices should be high in order to encourage farmers to produce milk. Actually if the farmer is going to produce cotton for friend Lipscomb here at a better price than he produces milk, he is going to produce cotton and not milk. This is an example of economic facts that must be known for an understanding of this problem.

'Response to Information'

MR. LIPSCOMB: That is certainly true, and the rapid development of the dairy industry down South may be the best proof you could possibly have of that.

MR. McBURNEY: Are you concerned about that?

MR. LIPSCOMB: Not at all; no, sir. We are convinced that exactly what Fairman has said is right, that the farmer is going to respond automatically to those situations in production which yield the best over-all welfare for the industry, and that he has been doing.

MR. McBURNEY: You men have been presenting here today what seems to me to be a competent—at times almost idealistic—approach to this whole field. Do you have any professional standards in public relations? How do you control this matter of ethics and morality in a field where I would suspect you might get a lot of misinformation?

MR. FAIRMAN: Well, if I might speak for the Public Relations Society, which is the national organization of the top public relations men, we con-

trol it pretty effectively in several ways.

First of all, we control it by knowing those whom we admit to membership. That is Number 1. Secondly, we have a code of ethics. Thirdly, at our convention in Chicago last fall we adopted enforcement machinery for the code of ethics, and if somebody doesn't live up to the code and is tried and found guilty of unethical conduct, he is outside the pale of the Society.

Fundamental Ethics

MR. SEITZ: Let me say just one more thing on a little different aspect of ethics. This is just my own opinion; I don't know what the other men at the table think about this, but I believe the public relations man has a responsibility to accept some fundamental ethics on which he builds.

In other words, I think this country was founded on the basis of Christian ethics. I think we have to accept those common, basic principles. As a matter of fact, if we don't, as far as I'm concerned, there is no reason why we should say that democracy is any better than any other form of government, because a democracy is supported upon Christian principles, and I really believe that the public relations profession should build on some basic truths.

Now, unfortunately—and I say this is true in some universities—some people preach today that there is no such thing as basic truth. I don't think that is true. I think there are basic truths, and the public relations profession has to expound them.

MR. FAIRMAN: Well, I'll go along with Seitz on that.

The only reason for the code is that as anything develops in complexity—and I think you'll agree to this—special situations come up which require clarification. You get into these border areas; the more complicated the situation is, the more border areas you have, and that is when you need the code.

I think any man of good sense and good conscience knows what is right and wrong, generally.

MR. LIPSCOMB: At the risk of a "commercial" for the Society, I might point out that the recognition of this problem that Seitz has pointed out is exactly what has led to the whole procedure of the past several years through which the top men in the public relations field have sought to organize themselves so solidly, to adopt such standards, that any man practicing public relations who was not identified with that group would be called on to prove that he was actually a top-ranking public relations man.

Truth in a Free Society

MR. McBURNEY: Is there anything more in your thesis, though, Seitz, than a pious preachment? Is there anything in the democratic system that helps make truth prevail?

As a matter of fact, to suggest an answer to my own question, I think there is—very much so. I think where you are selling ideas, goods and services in a free society, where one man can say one thing and another man can correct him, you have a very natural preventive, a very natural corrective.

MR. REYNOLDS: Just as in economics we have different competition in presenting information, it is that very freedom of competition in presenting information that assures in a democracy that the people are going to get the truth. If one man doesn't give in to him, somebody else is bound to do it.

MR. LIPSCOMB: As a matter of fact the thing that is going to determine which way this country goes in its whole economic development, its political development, is going to be the power of public opinion. This will be the case as long as we are free and as long as we have a democracy.

Certainly, there is no group in this country more responsible for the opinions held by the public than public relations people who make their living professionally through using tools intended to affect public opinion.

MR. FAIRMAN: I should like to get back to Seitz' point on the ethics involved in this. Confidence is basic in

every professional relationship, and the man who loses confidence by his conduct is out of any profession, whether he is a physician or lawyer or whatever he is. He loses his clients. The same happens in the public relations field. If your conduct isn't ethical, confidence is broken down, and you can't do a job for anyone.

Gain to Society

MR. McBURNEY: I can think of no better way of summarizing this discussion than to ask you men the question, "What does society gain by good public relations?"

MR. REYNOLDS: I think it gains understanding, first of all, and if there is any way we are going to bring people together and have a better world, it is through understanding of each other. That is exactly the main aim of public relations, looking at it in a broad way. It is bringing people closer together in understanding, and in that way, I think, it performs great service.

MR. McBURNEY: How would you answer that question?

MR. LIPSCOMB: I would answer it just like Reynolds did, with perhaps the addition of this, that in promoting understanding, it also engenders co-operation. If you want to put it in the negative way, it means the reduction of friction between groups through understanding.

MR. FAIRMAN: I would say "Amen" to both of them.

MR. McBURNEY: Seitz, how would you answer that question?

MR. SEITZ: Well, I'd get down to the specifics a little more. I would say if the public relations man can make people understand the tremendous significance of the right to vote, the right to free speech, the right to religion, the right to own property—those things are so fundamental that he will indeed be going a long way toward preserving our American form of life.

MR. REYNOLDS: We all say "Amen" to that, of course.

MR. McBURNEY: In negotiating this

job we are discussing, it seems to me you are giving to yourselves, as public relations officers, a pretty heavy responsibility. What specifications do you lay down for that kind of a job? What are the requirements of a good public relations officer, Reynolds?

Requirements

MR. REYNOLDS: Well, he must have a very good knowledge of the organization or institution that he is working for. That is certain. And then he must have a good knowledge of the techniques that he uses, the tools that he uses in bringing about understanding.

I know there are some executives who think he should know as much about the corporation (if he is working for a corporation) as the top executives themselves do, and that is a little bit difficult, because in this age of specialization, I think his top knowledge should be in the field of techniques, but certainly he does have to know a great deal more about the organization in general than the man who specializes in other fields ordinarily does.

MR. SEITZ: Speaking specifically

from the University's standpoint, I feel a man needs very broad training in such things as economics, sociology, psychology, and, of course, getting back to what Mr. Reynolds said, journalism, because there you get more into the techniques.

MR. McBURNEY: I should think it would be enormously important that any man attempting to work in the kind of field you men are discussing be economically literate.

MR. FAIRMAN: I'd say very definitely he has to be economically literate, or he can't teach anyone else.

MR. LIPSCOMB: He has to be that, and he also has to be articulate with his typewriter, or in his handling of tools. But to me, above all else, he must have an evangelical attitude based on a fundamental honesty, out of which comes an enthusiasm to create this sort of understanding and co-operation that we are talking about. He is really just about one step below the man in the pulpit from the standpoint of the missionary zeal with which he approaches the problem . . .

ANNOUNCER: I am sorry to interrupt but our time is up.

Suggested Reading

Compiled by William Huff,
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,
Deering Library, Northwestern University.



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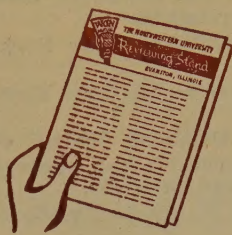
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